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ABSTRACT

Although a degree in Professional and Technical Communication (PTC) is a "practical" degree, its hands-on nature does not preclude it from providing students with a sound liberal education. For one educator, those who major in professional/technical communication are better prepared to fill many of the jobs that are currently going to students majoring in traditional humanities programs. Unless traditional humanities majors wish to pursue a career in academia, many of them would be better served by the more user-centered PTC degree, "user-centered" meaning that students learn how to produce material--documents, Web pages, videos, interactive CDs and DVDs--for people who need to accomplish a task or learn more to make an informed decision. Technical communication can be seen as a hybrid form created from that traditional user-centered discipline called rhetoric and new technologies. Like their counterparts in humanities programs, PTC majors leave college with a sound education in writing and analytical thinking--two attributes that employers value highly. When PTC majors take philosophy and history classes in their own department they learn how technologies such as computers have influenced people's lives or how environmental degradation from mining has long term social consequences. Rather than a degree that trains students to be specialists in a particular software tool or documentation method, the PTC degree educates students in a broad appreciation of how to make difficult concepts or equipment understandable. The PTC degree trains students in the fine art of flexibility. (NKA)

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Professional and Technical Communication: The Humanities Degree for the 21st Century.

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1

CS 510 772

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**"Professional and Technical Communication:
The Humanities Degree for the 21st-Century"**

I teach in a department of Professional and Technical Communication at Montana Tech of the University of Montana. Although the "Tech" is not short for anything, I probably still hail from the institution and possibly the department with the longest name on the 4Cs program. Fortunately we have abbreviations: we call the school "Montana Tech," and we call my department and our degree "PTC," which is what I call it in this paper.

Although the PTC degree is a "practical" degree, its hands-on nature does not preclude it from providing students with a sound liberal education. Frequently thought of by the academic community as "merely" training in technical writing, those who graduate with a PTC degree often go on to fill a wide variety of positions—both in the private and public sectors. In fact, I believe that those who major in professional and technical communication are better prepared to fill many of the jobs that are currently going to students majoring in traditional humanities programs. Unless traditional humanities majors wish to pursue a career in academia, many of them would be better served by the more user-centered PTC degree.

CS 510 772

So what do I mean by "user-centered"? This means that students learn how to produce material—documents, Web pages, videos, interactive CDs and DVDs—for people who need to accomplish a task or learn more in order to make an informed decision. Although I don't wish to push for overly rigid categories, I think that because technical communication is a "user-centered" discipline, it has a fundamentally different goal than other traditional humanities disciplines. Rather than being concerned with analyzing aesthetic texts, art, or ideas, technical communicators are concerned with producing material for people who need to get something done. When technical communicators do analyze, they do so from the standpoint of rhetoricians and measure effectiveness.

Just as new media can be seen as hybrid form created from established methods of communication and new technologies, technical communication can be seen as a hybrid form created from that traditional user-centered discipline called rhetoric and new technologies. As in the traditional field of rhetoric, technical communication, as a user-centered discipline, is concerned less with discovering truths or identifying objects of aesthetic concern and more with understanding how to convey truths or aesthetic concerns. Although my drawing such a rigid distinction between rhetoric, philosophy, science, and art may be too inflexible for some here, my point is to illustrate the distinction between a PTC degree and a

traditional humanities degree. In short, the PTC degree is designed to help students learn the ways of negotiating practical (vs. aesthetic) ideas.

As a way of educating students about the many possibilities open to those trained in professional and technical communication, those who market such programs could learn from those who market traditional English programs. English departments often recruit students by claiming that English majors can "do most anything." (We've all heard this line I'm sure.) A typical recruitment line is as follows: "An employer can train you to do a specific job, but an employer cannot teach you to think critically, to respond intelligently, to analyze and synthesize, to communicate your thoughts and ideas, especially in writing. Having these skills—which you develop as an English major—gives you the opportunity to do almost anything" (All that said in just two sentences, by the way.) (Florida Southern College). PTC majors are similarly educated, but rather than assume that they will undergo a pragmatic shift in how they think once they graduate, PTC majors are also educated in how to address user-centered practical everyday concerns.

Like their counterparts in traditional humanities programs, PTC majors leave college with a sound education in writing and analytical thinking—two attributes that employers value highly. Unlike traditional humanities majors, however, the education of PTC majors is user- rather than academic-centered. Sure, PTC majors take humanities courses in such disciplines as philosophy and history, but these

courses focus more on ethical and practical concerns than on concerns of aesthetics or universal truths. We in our department refer to these courses as "social context" courses because they provide students with a social context for why and how communication takes place. In our department we have a philosopher/historian of science and technology studies. When PTC majors take philosophy and history classes from this professor they learn such things as how technologies such as computers have influenced our lives or how environmental degradation from mining often has long term social consequences. I think what is important to realize here is that the user-centered courses offered in a PTC degree—whether they be courses in writing, production, or social context—educate students in how to contribute to the decisions that are made in both their workplaces and in their communities.

Thus, rather than be a degree that trains students to be specialists in a particular computer software tool or documentation method, the PTC degree educates students in a broad appreciation of how to make difficult concepts or equipment understandable to decision makers and users. It therefore is ironic that although the field of technical communication was forged in the crucible on 19th and 20th Century industrial specialization, the PTC degree is one that trains students in the fine art of flexibility.

The flexibility of the PTC degree can be compared to the liberal education provided to American college students during the 19th-Century. As Robert Connors points out, the curriculum of American colleges during the 1800's (particularly before the Civil War) "worked against specialization" ("Rhetoric in the Modern University" 57). It was not until the formation of public colleges following the Civil War, which were intent on educating students in practical or what was called "useful knowledge," that we begin to see a specialization in academic disciplines. Just as the practical/liberal education of the 19th-Century before the Civil War prepared students of that era for life as civic leaders (primarily as lawyers and members of the clergy), the PTC degree prepares students for 21st-Century civic concerns.

These civic concerns are becoming increasingly complicated on both the technological and rhetorical fronts: The PTC degree addresses the use and understanding of technology; students learn *how* to effectively communicate technical ideas to a larger audience. Moreover, students learn not only *how* to use, say, a new-media software, but *how* to best apply the effects that such software has to offer, and *how* to determine whether, or even, to use such software at all.

From a standpoint of flexibility, PTC students also learn what rhetorical strategies are best suited for advancing ideas in an increasingly technologically competitive world. Because an increasing number of civic concerns are centered

around technological issues, the successful rhetors of the 21st-Century will require the capacity not only to form solid well-grounded arguments, but they will also need to have a good understand how technologies work as well.

Works Cited

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